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SUBJECT: THE JURASH ARCHAEOLOGICAL DIG: SEASON II, DIGGING
DEEPER

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RIYADH 00001021 001.2 OF 002

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

¶1. (SBU) On July 31, the CDA and an Embassy delegation visited the Jurash archaeological dig in Asir province, the first U.S. - Saudi joint excavation in the Kingdom. The Jurash dig, currently in its second season, is funded by ExxonMobil. The Embassy played an important part in facilitating Saudi government approval for the project. Rarely visited by Westerners, the Asir province produced five of the 9/11 terrorists. Archaeology is a highly controversial subject in the Kingdom as it challenges the narrow Islamist interpretation of the peninsula's history. By promoting archaeology and supporting scientific inquiry into Saudi Arabia's past, we are furthering our counter-terrorism agenda in a meaningful, long-term way. The Saudis, who were initially reluctant to engage on this topic, have now given this project fairly wide publicity. End summary and comment.

JURASH: OVERCOMING RESISTANCE

¶2. (SBU) Jurash, in the remote and mountainous Asir region, was an important trade and manufacturing center on the route from Yemen to Palestine during the pre-Islamic and early Islamic period. The dean of Saudi Archeologists, Dr. Abdul Kerim Al-Ghamdi, wrote about the site twenty-five years ago and arranged for its preservation. Since then, the site had not been developed beyond a basic survey, during which Al-Ghamdi discovered a third century A.D. coin displaying the head of Roman emperor Caracalla and which had been minted in Syria.

¶3. (SBU) Archaeology, especially when it involves pre-Islamic sites, is a controversial subject in the Kingdom as it challenges the narrow Islamist interpretation of the peninsula's history (i.e. that artifacts pre-dating the prophet Mohammed are objectionable signs of idolatry). Religious extremists look askance at the period before Islam, known as "The Ignorance (Jahiliya)," and have been either indifferent or actively hostile to the relics of the past. The dominant sect in the Kingdom, the Wahhabis, disdain veneration of any object, shrine, or holy site other than the Quran and the Ka'aba in Mecca. Extremists interpret the scientific investigation of antiquities as a direct assault on their approach to history.

¶4. (SBU) The Saudi government has taken several quiet and deliberate, but nonetheless determined, steps to challenge extremists and open the Kingdom to the modern world through scientific inquiry. In 2007, the government transferred the

management of archaeology from the Ministry of Education, largely controlled by religious conservatives, to the High Commission for Tourism and Antiquities. Prince Sultan bin Salman, a former astronaut and one of the most progressive (Al Saud) princes, heads the Commission. The signing of a five-year agreement in August 2008 to survey and explore the Jurash site was another significant, progressive step. Embassy Riyadh, University of Miami archaeologist Dr. David Graf, and ExxonMobil CEO Desmond Carr worked diligently to build confidence on the Saudi side to take a risk on this kind of a project with a joint U.S. - Saudi team. ExxonMobil, the project's major sponsor, has contributed \$375,000 and is ready to contribute more as needed.

SEASONS I AND II: DIGGING DEEPER

15. (SBU) In August 2008, a Saudi-American team commenced digging in Jurash and immediately found significant pre-Islamic structures and artifacts. The team's initial discoveries included a major temple or administrative site, the remains of an industrial district, and an ancient well/cistern. An Embassy delegation visited the site in August 2008, and described Saudi cooperation at that time as excellent and increasingly enthusiastic.

16. (SBU) The second season of the excavation began on July 22, 2009 and will continue through August 20. The CDA and an Embassy delegation visited the site July 31. Graf, a U.S. scholar on the ancient Nabataean Arab kingdom of Petra, is providing overall direction to this year's team of archaeologists, which includes eight Americans, two Canadians, and one German. The protected site, about half a kilometer by a quarter, is well-preserved, but only covers perhaps one-third of the original city. The team intends to

RIYADH 00001021 002 OF 002

survey neighboring sites such as Kutnah (60 km northeast of Jurash) and several mining sites (20 km southwest of Jurash) in order to understand and interpret the remains at Jurash. In a meeting on August 1, the CDA relayed a request from Graf to the Governor of Asir, Prince Faisal bin Khalid, for additional security forces so the team could travel to outlying areas as part of their excavation activities. The Governor said it was "no problem" to provide extra security to facilitate this expanded exploration (septel).

INCREASED OPENNESS THROUGH SCIENTIFIC COOPERATION

17. (SBU) The Saudi archaeologists have expressed their hope that the Jurash project can become a base for archaeological research in the southwest region of Saudi Arabia. Eventually they would also like to see artifacts from Jurash sent to the U.S. as part of a traveling exhibition. Exxon/Mobil CEO Desmond Carr, who accompanied the CDA to Jurash, indicated that Exxon/Mobil is very interested in supporting such an exhibit. Thus the Saudis have moved from reluctance to begin one small project to a desire to publicize the project and the U.S. role in making it happen.

ERDMAN